

SECOND PLACE WINNER

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Essay Question – 3

Silence is golden. This old axiom might ring true in certain social situations how else are you suppose to answer Do I look fat in this? But it has no merit in the battle for human rights. History provides countless examples of the horrible consequences of abiding by this standard of silence. Think of the 1.5 million children murdered during the Holocaust that could have been saved if more Germans or European nations had taken a stand sooner. (Bülow, The Holocaust Children) Or think of the millions of slaves separated from their families and reduced to property that could have lived freely if more people spoke out against the oppression. Or think more recently to the 10-year-old child laborers working in a Gap sweatshop in India that could be in school if consumers or corporations would stop silently accepting this as the status quo. Many who adopt positions of silence do so to avoid confrontation, thinking that by not acting they preventing further conflict. This is not at all true. As Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Wisessel said, “Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.” In order to achieve human rights for all we must “never be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation.” Speaking out against unjust and inhumane treatment is always the right thing to do.

Wisessel defines a violation of human rights as “whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation.” The United Nations goes further in their definition of human rights listing thirty articles in their 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. They acknowledged, “...recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world...” In Burma there is no such foundation therefore Burmese citizens are being denied the right to freedom, justice, and peace. The citizens in Burma are subject to the rule of a military junta whose oppressive regime started in 1988. Upon seizing control the junta suspended the Burmese democratic constitution. Under their regime citizens have “no guarantee of fair trial”. (United States, Background Note: Burma) The military rule in Burma is oppressive as well as violent. In a September 1988 protest the military rule killed 3,000 public demonstrators and forced over 10,000 students to

flee to the hills or borders of Burma. This is just six months after the government abruptly ended the promising lives of over 1,000 student protesters. Additionally in September 2007, 30 demonstrators were killed according to a report to the UN General Assembly (United States, Background Note: Burma). However, those who have fought and died for human rights in Burma have not spoken out in vain. Their breach of silence has encourage other people, nations, or organizations to get involved and help the Burmese achieve “the right to life, liberty and security of person” ensured by the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The activists in Burma clearly demonstrate Wisessel’s argument that battle for human rights requires outspokenness. Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi refused to be silenced and fought for democracy and freedom in Burma. The daughter of General Aung San became the charismatic leader of the pro-democracy movement there. She spoke out against the military junta in 1988 after the government’s brutal massacre of protesters. As a result of her breaking silence she was placed under house arrest. However her stance and forthrightness inspired others to take action. She served as the motivation to the more than 10,000 monks that led a peaceful and nationally known protest starting in September of 2007. In turn the monks’ protest brought Aung San Suu Kyi out of silence. She was allowed to make her first public appearance in more than four years. (Kaung, Monks Versus the Military) Aung San Suu Kyi proves that taking a stand is never ineffective. Her position against the Burmese government may not have resulted in instantaneous change but her ideas, principles, and general presence helped move forward the Burmese movement for human rights.

One such step forward was the Burmese Monk demonstrations that showed that sometimes breaking silence does not even require a single word. The movement originally started when a handful of local monks took a stand against the cruel junta and refused to give alms, the ultimate insult in the Buddhist religion. (Kaung, Monks Versus the Military) Military hired thugs responded immediately and arrested and beat the protesting monks, but the monks had already sparked a movement. Hundreds, then thousands of monks joined in the nation-wide boycott and attracted crowds of over 100,000 citizens. The monks who flooded the

streets of Burma brought the plight of the Burmese people to the attention of the world. The bravery and ascetic nature of the monks, by refusing to take up alms the monks were literally turning over their food bowls, inspired others. Their silent strike, spread at first by mere whispers and leaked photos, resulted in the some of the biggest changes in the Burmese government in century. The monks' peaceful protest and the government's subsequent crackdown lead the a U.S. and U.K. UN Security Counsel Resolution that implores Burma to cooperate with the UN Security General and to allow humanitarian organizations easier access to its oppressed citizens. Also in November of 2007 the UN Commission on Human Rights Special Rapporteur was allowed to enter Burma for the first time in five years. As a result of the increase foreign pressure the Burmese government has agreed to hold a Constitutional Drafting and began to do so December 3, 2007, however member of the pro-democracy party were not invited into the committee. (United States, Background Note: Burma) The Burmese Monks stand against the Burmese government helped to create an international outcry for human rights in Burma, however the Burmese struggle for human rights is far from over.

It is easy to look negatively at the results of the Burmese Monks' strike. Many of the monks were imprisoned and tortured and Burma is still under the rule of the harsh military junta. This is over simplifying things. The impact of the monks' stand against the government's human rights violations is undeniable. Their breach of silence has people who had never heard of Burma now discussing the fate of the country. Speaking out against the Burmese government started a movement. It enlightened people and nations to the grievances of the Burmese citizens. The monks and other activists motivated others to action and they serve as a source of hope and inspiration for others.

People who speak out against violations on human rights never do so in vain; someone somewhere will hear their voice. In the case of the Burmese Monk strike one voice, Aung San Suu Kyi's, was heard by a handful of monks. This small group of monks then brought the unjust conditions in Burma to the world. They spoke out against an oppressive ruler and some suffered for it, but their courage helped millions along the path to "freedom, justice and peace in the world". (United Nations, Universal Declaration of Human

Rights) Taking stand and speaking out against a tormentor brings attention to an issue and ends the oppressive silence of tormentor's victims. In order to achieve human rights for all we must take a page from the Burmese monks and speak out when we see human suffering.